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Clicktivism Or Slacktivism? Impression Management and Moral Licensing.

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Social network sites provide the opportunity to engage in “clicktivism”, i.e., expressing one’s support to programs of social change symbolically. We build on previous work in moral dynamics and suggest that clicktivism can reduce levels of “real” prosocial behavior. We propose that impression management concern explains the effect.

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Clicktivism or Slacktivism? Impression Management and Moral Licensing.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recent research has demonstrated moral licensing effects in a number of contexts, including consumer choice (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Mazar & Zhong, 2010). Under certain conditions, after engaging in prosocial or morally appropriate behavior, individuals consider that they can “afford” to engage in less ethical behavior, without discrediting themselves (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). For example, in Mazar and Zhong (2010), participants who made environmentally friendly product “choices” in a first phase—their choice set only contained green items—were more likely to cheat on subsequent tasks than participants who did not have the opportunity to make similarly green choices. Such effects are typically explained in terms of fluctuations in the moral self-image (Cornelissen, Bashshur, Rode, & Le Menestrel, Forthcoming; Jordan, Gino, Tenbrunsel, & Leliveld, 2012). Individuals hold a certain aspiration level regarding how “moral” they ought to be. A moral or prosocial act elevates the working level of the moral self-image (Monin & Jordan, 2009). If this working level exceeds the aspiration level, an individual feels licensed to engage in self-interested behavior.

This paper makes two contributions to previous moral licensing research. First, we test whether a mere symbolic moral action (i.e., one that is not costly and does not generate tangible benefits for the recipient) is sufficient to produce a moral licensing effect. For example, when building a user profile on social network websites, one may attempt to generate a favorable impression by indicating that one supports charitable and pro-social organizations. In two studies, we test whether having the opportunity to engage in such merely symbolic actions decreases an individual’s motivation to engage in actual moral or prosocial behavior. Second, we propose that impression management concerns provide an alternative route to moral licensing. Being perceived as a moral person by others is generally considered desirable (Alexander, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Wedekind & Milinski, 2000). However, once an individual has established or signaled one’s moral character in the eyes of others, s/he might be more likely to pursue his/her self-interest subsequently. If this is true, we expect that moral licensing effects of symbolic actions will be especially pronounced for individuals that are highly concerned with impression management.

In Study 1, we tested whether having the opportunity to engage in a symbolic action leads to a moral licensing effect. In a first phase of the experiment, 73 participants read a short description about the work of a charitable organization (i.e., UNICEF). At the end, about half of the participants could choose whether or not to tick a box that said “I support UNICEF” (similar to the “like” option on a Facebook page). The box did not appear for the other half of the participants. After that, instructions explained that the organization in question is collecting short and catchy slogans to communicate their mission. Participants were invited to help and provide such slogans, although it was mentioned that doing so was voluntary. Results indicated that participants produced fewer slogans after they could express their support to the organization symbolically ($M = 0.43$, $SD = 0.85$), compared to those who did not have that opportunity ($M = 0.90$, $SD = 0.77$, $F(1, 71) = 5.65$, $p = .02$). In Study 2, 119 participants first read a paragraph about an NGO working on fair trade issues (i.e., Intermon Oxfam). Then about half of them were given the option to express their support to this orga-

nization symbolically by clicking a box saying “I support Intermon Oxfam.” In a second phase, participants received a bar of fair trade chocolate marketed by that NGO, and were offered the opportunity to donate a part of their show-up fee (9€) to support the NGO’s activities. Afterwards, we measured individual differences in self-monitoring as a proxy for impression management tendencies. We found an interaction effect between self-monitoring (as a continuous variable) and having the opportunity to contribute symbolically ($t(118) = -2.28$, $p = .02$). Spotlight analysis showed that, for participants high in self-monitoring, having the opportunity to contribute symbolically reduced their financial contribution to the NGO. For participants low in self-monitoring, we did not find such an effect.

Together, these results show that having the opportunity to express one’s support or positive intentions symbolically may have adverse effects on “real” contributions made. This effect is especially likely to produce for individuals who care relatively more about their image in the eyes of others. These results are especially relevant in domains where symbolic expression of one’s opinion is the norm, such as when individuals build a profile on social networks, or activities in online activism programs. Our results show that such “clicktivism” may have an undesirable impact on subsequent prosocial behavior.

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